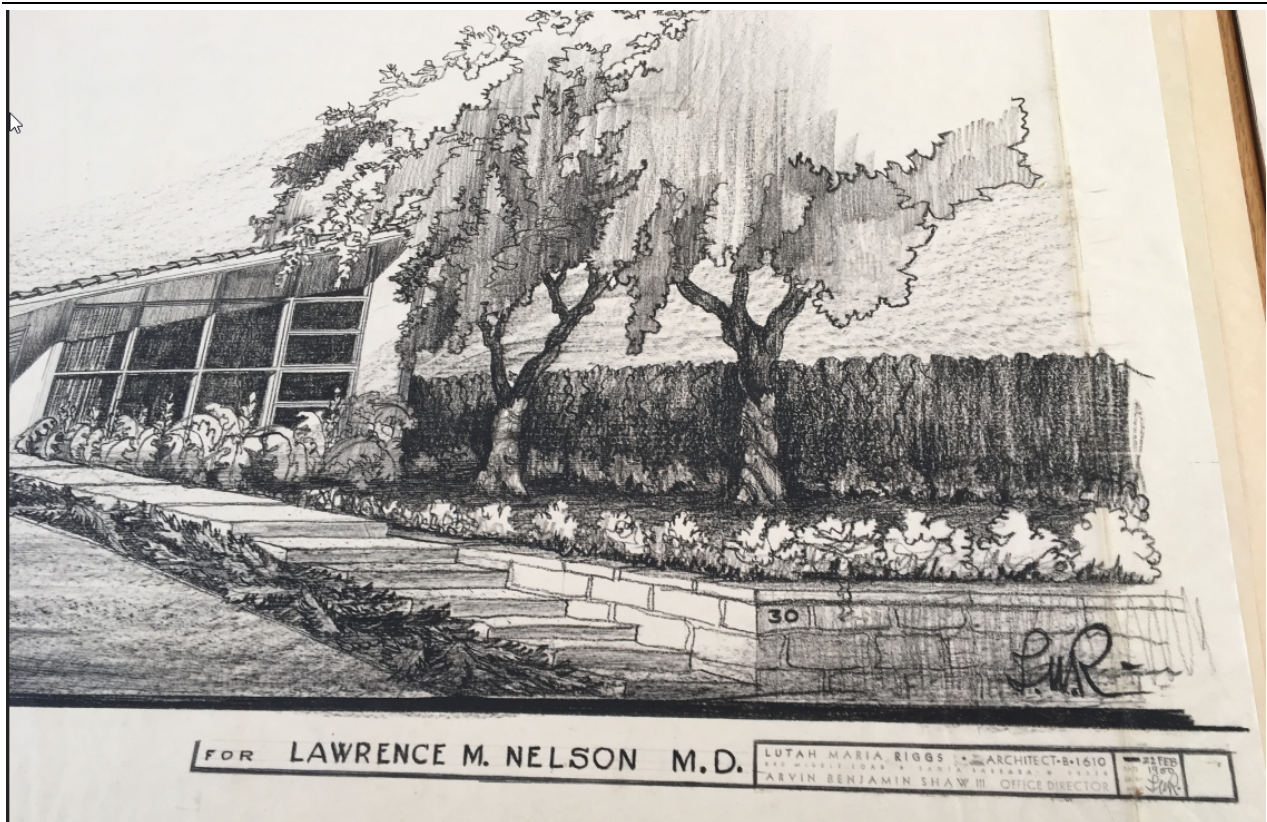


HISTORIC LANDMARKS COMMISSION
CITY LANDMARK DESIGNATION
STAFF REPORT

NELSON MEDICAL BUILDING
30 WEST ARRELLAGA STREET
SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA
APN 027-181-013



Background:

Noted Santa Barbara architect, Lutah Maria Riggs, F.A.I.A. designed the Nelson Medical

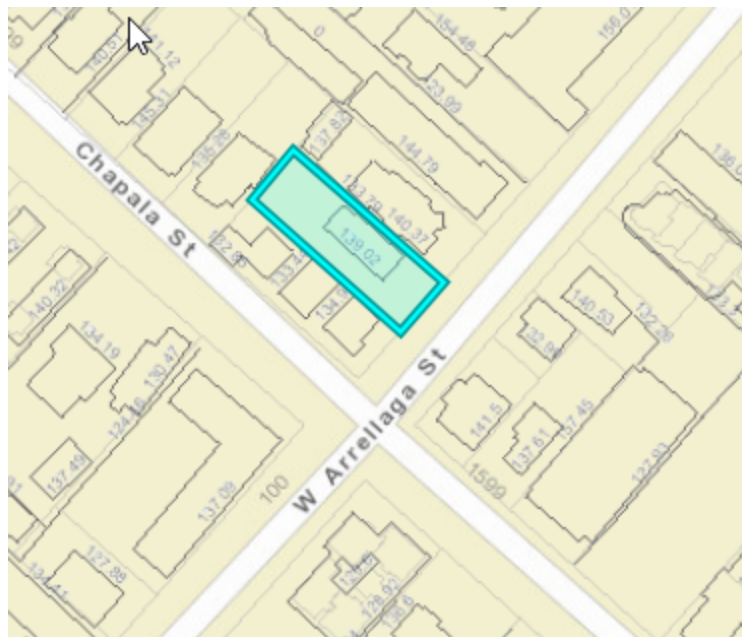
Above: Original rendering by Lutah Riggs of the mid-century modern style Nelson Medical building, 1950. Courtesy UCSB Architecture and Design Collection.

Building in 1950. Riggs designed the building to be the new medical offices of Dr. Lawrence Nelson in the mid-century modern style. It is a quiet building, set behind a woodsy front yard that gives the feeling of nature coming into the building that architects of the style accomplished by mixing simplified Japanese elements into the architectural vocabulary with a clean, minimalist aesthetic, an emphasis on bringing the outdoors in, and the presence of angular structures.

The City placed the building on the Potential Historic Resources List in 1978. The proposed boundary of the City Landmark designation includes the entire parcel as the building with the significant landscape takes up the majority of the parcel. Because the building meets the City Landmark eligibility

criteria for its architectural style and historical significance, it is the opinion of the Historic Landmarks Commission Designation Subcommittee that the building is an excellent candidate for City Landmark designation.

Vicinity Map



Blue line indicates proposed boundary of the City Landmark designation, which includes the entire parcel, as the building and landscape are important to the site.

*Vicinity Map, City of Santa Barbara Mapping
Analysis and Printing System, 2015*

Historic Context and Architect Lulah Maria Riggs F.A.I.A.:

After attending the Santa Barbara Normal School for teaching, Lulah Maria Riggs won a scholarship to attend the University of California at Berkeley in 1918, where she began architectural studies along with only four other women. The department was a direct outgrowth of the French L'Ecole Des Beaux Arts classical architecture school.

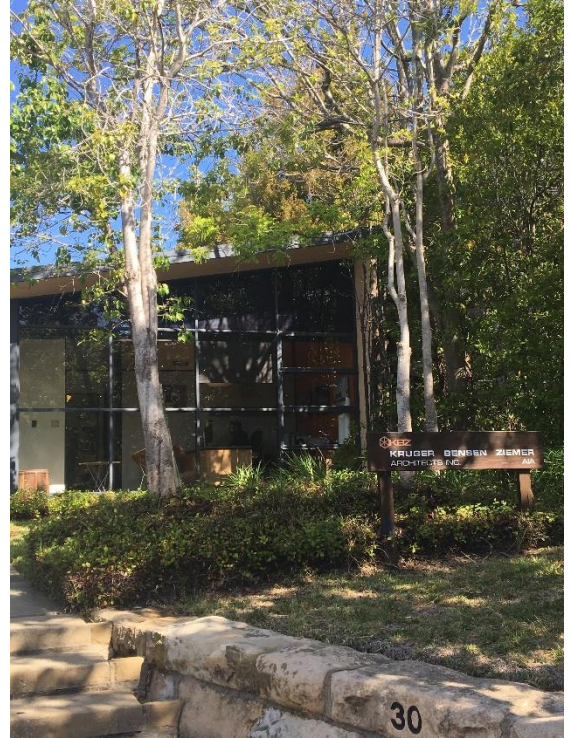
When Riggs moved to Santa Barbara, she worked as a draftsman for the noted architect George Washington Smith, known for his Spanish Colonial Revival style buildings. Smith and his wife were so taken by Riggs that she became somewhat of a surrogate daughter to the couple. She travelled with the Smith family on their architectural study trips to Mexico in 1922, and Europe in 1924. Also in 1924, Smith made Riggs a partner in the firm, and gave her the title of chief draftsman. Riggs eventually became extremely influential in much of the firm's design work, and in some cases was fully responsible for the design of commissions. She contributed significantly to the designs of some of Smith's most well-known buildings, including the Lobero Theatre.

In 1928, Riggs obtained her architectural license. She continued to work for George Washington Smith through 1930, when Smith had a sudden heart attack and died. After a short stint working in partnership with colleagues, Riggs started her own firm in 1931, which she ran until 1942. During these years, Riggs completed a fair amount of residential work for wealthy clients in the Santa Barbara/Montecito area, as well as some commercial/institutional work, such as the Blakely Library at the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden (1942). She also designed modest residences for the Rolling Hills development on the Palos Verdes peninsula south of Los Angeles. During World War II, Riggs worked briefly as a set designer on MGM and Warner Brothers films.

Immediately after World War II, Riggs continued to produce some traditional designs. But turned toward modernism. In 1945, Riggs began a partnership with Arvin Shaw that lasted to 1951, continuing to focus on residential work, though in a more modernist style. Her work from 1945 to the 1950s was considered the mid-century modern style with an informal woodsy tradition. A few of her designs from this era,



like the Nelson Medical Office, exhibited single sloped, shed roofs. Exterior wall surfaces tended to be board and batten or stucco. She used glass extensively, fenestrated with a repeated pattern of vertical and horizontal structural members. The interiors were generally restrained and somewhat formal, which made it possible to respond to these spaces being both modern and formal. Her use of wood sheathing, and above all, exposed wood structure, convey an atmosphere shared with the traditional wood houses of Japan. As seen in the Nelson Medical building, she used thin porch posts with intervening glass to exhibit some of the delicacy of form and detailing of a classic Japanese pavilion. Riggs designed the Nelson Medical building only a year before the Alice Erving house in Montecito (1951). They share the characteristics of the glass wall under the roofline. The Erving house is well known for its unique siting that maintains privacy while opening up to expansive views of the surrounding mountains, as well as for its floor-to-ceiling windows and vaulted ceilings. As noted by David Gebhard, the Erving house shared qualities with several of America's modernists of the late forties, the Riggs designs also anticipated the fascination with the use of "pure" geometric forms which appreciably expanded within American architecture in the 1950s.



In 1951, she left the partnership to work on her own, continuing to do residential as well as some commercial work. One of her most famous buildings from this era is her design for the Santa Barbara Vedanta Temple (1956), noted for its reflection of early South Indian wooden temple architecture.

In addition to running her practice, Riggs was active in her local AIA chapter, and served on the California Architects' Board as both a member and a Commissioner. In 1960, she was named a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects for "excellence in design and service to the profession". In 1967, the *Los Angeles Times* named her "Woman of the Year", the first architect to be chosen for this honor. Riggs continued to practice architecture through 1980, and died in Montecito, California in 1984. The Architectural Foundation of Santa Barbara funded a yearly scholarship in Riggs' name, to be given to architectural students, with special consideration for women.

In 1992, noted architectural historian, David Gebhard wrote the book, *Lutah Maria Riggs, A Woman In Architecture 1921-1980*, memorializing the architectural career of one of America's distinguished woman architects.

Riggs's architectural legacy is growing. In 2013, Santa Barbara citizens created The Lutah Maria Riggs Society to celebrate the courage and creative brilliance of the architect for whom the Society is named. Her remarkable work should command an important position in the history of American architecture, and yet until 2013 it had gone largely unrecognized. With the expertise of Lutah archivist and historian Melinda Gandara, the Society has engaged hundreds of community members to share stories, memories, and places that went into an exciting film about Lutah. *Lutah, A Passion for Architecture: A Life in Design* premiered at the 2014 Santa Barbara International Film Festival to rave reviews. The film premiered in 38 film festivals and won 5 awards.

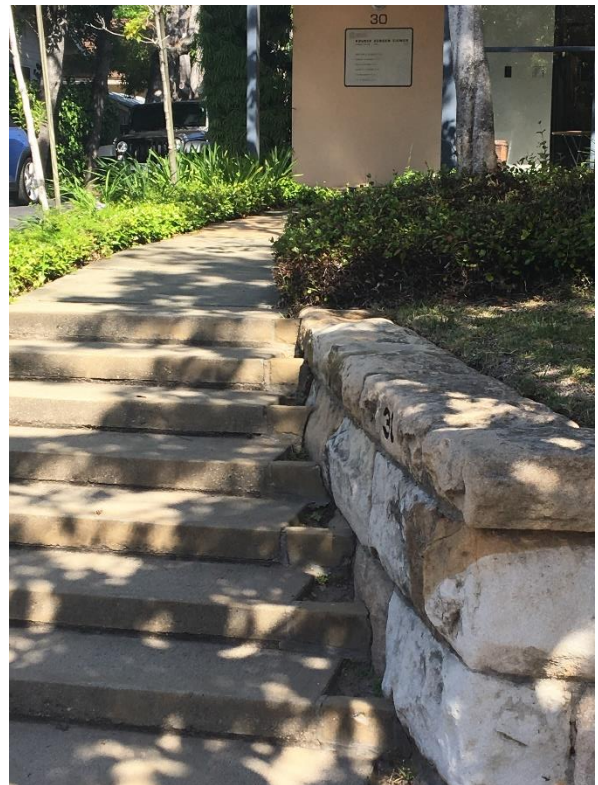
Mid-century modern Style:

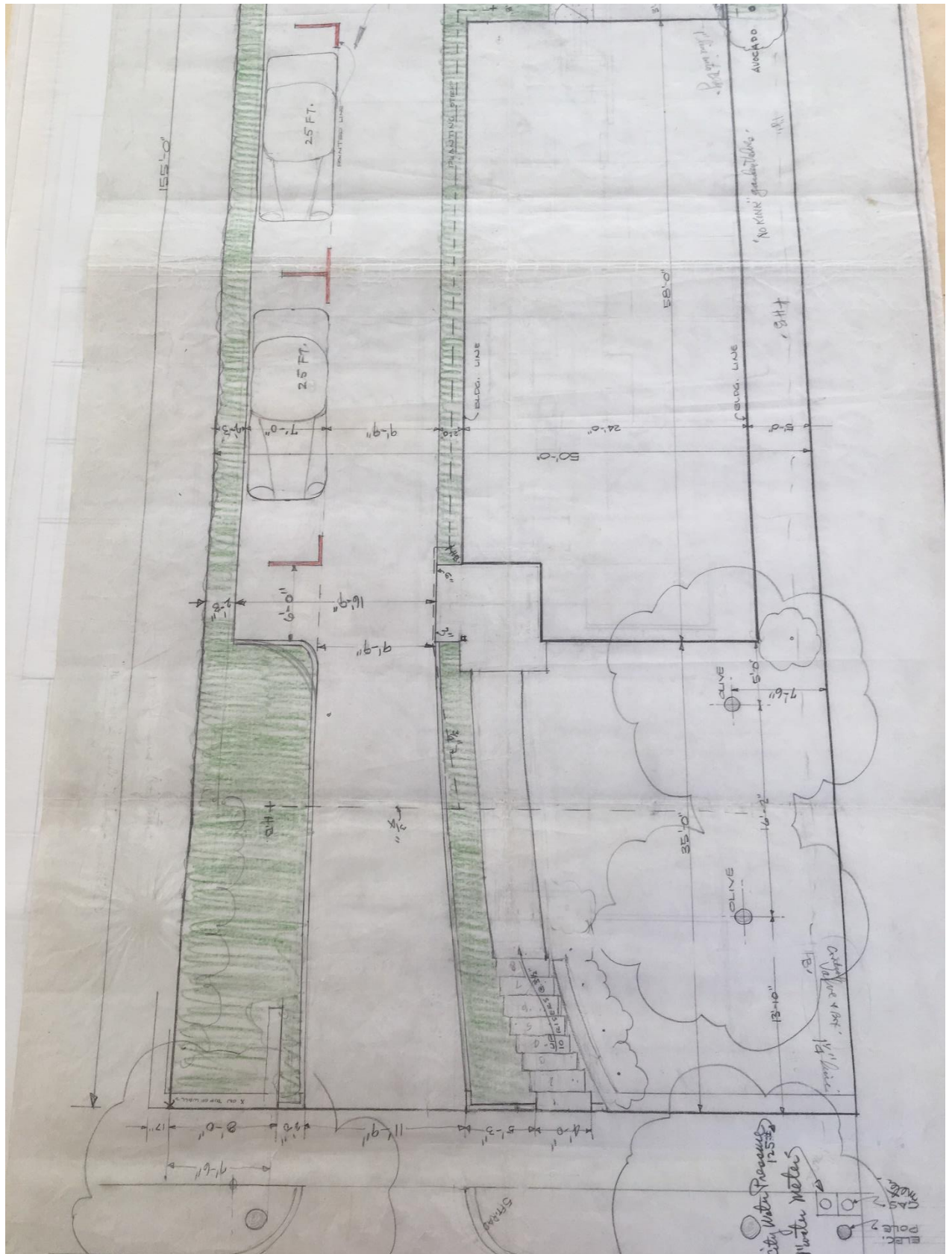
World War II reversed the pattern of period designed architecture popular in the early 20th century. The Nelson Building demonstrates the Modernist-influenced architectural style, a style that is not common in Santa Barbara. Its style is representative of a brief period in post-World War II Santa Barbara during which architects introduced new, non-Spanish-influenced architectural themes. Asymmetric facades, rectilinear flat roofs, metal and glass compositions with open plans, smooth wall surfaces, and no decorative detailing characterize the mid-century modern style. Creating an architectural style that took advantage of the new materials brought about by the modern industrial civilization was major goal of mid-century modern architects. Mid-century modern buildings demonstrated an innovative new style on the landscape of mid-20th-century America. Riggs's design of Nelson Medical Building expresses the character defining features of mid-century modern architecture showcasing three predominant characteristics: a clean, minimalist aesthetic, an emphasis on bringing the outdoors in, and the presence of angular structures. In the middle of the 20th century, many artists began working in an abstract style, re-imagining traditional art and pioneering a new aesthetic. This interest in abstract forms carried to the architecture of the time, as demonstrated by mid-century modern's minimalist appearance. Flat planes, clean lines, and little ornamentation characterize both the exteriors—which often feature monochromatic brickwork and pops of color—and the matching interiors of mid-century modern buildings.

Significant Landscaping:

Another key characteristic of the mid-century modern style is a relationship with nature. Architects working in this style often incorporated large windows and open floor plans into their designs, which provided scenic views and let large amounts of light into the interior. As per the Riggs renderings of the Nelson Medical building, she designed wide, slightly curved steps along the sandstone wall that gently lead to the simple entrance of the buildings. With Riggs's talented hand, the following features of the landscape are character defining:

1. The sandstone wall and concrete steps leading through the deep yard to the building. The sandstone brings a native and familiar Santa Barbara material to the site;
2. The path that gently passes the ground cover and trees giving the site the feeling the a woodsy setting;
3. The way the path leads to the front glass wall bringing the outdoors into the building.





Significance:

The City of Santa Barbara defines historic significance as outlined by the Municipal Code, Section 22.22.040. It is the opinion of the Historic Landmarks Commission Designations Subcommittee that the Nelson Medical Building designed by Lulah Maria Riggs is an excellent candidate for City Landmark designation per the following four criteria:

Criterion A. Its character, interest, or value as a significant part of the heritage of the City, the State, or the Nation;

One of Santa Barbara's most noted architects, Lulah Maria Riggs, designed the 1950 mid-century modern style building that is important to the heritage of Santa Barbara. The details that are found on the building constitute a resource valuable for its ability to exemplify methods of construction, craftsmanship, attention to detail, and artistry reflective of the mid-century modern style.

Criterion D. Its exemplification of a particular architectural style or way of life important to the City, the State, or the Nation:

Lulah Maria Riggs's Nelson Medical Building is an excellent example of the mid-century modern style. This style of architecture found its place in America after World War II and flourished for several decades, with the height of the movement occurring in the 1950s. Mid-century modern's strong influences are still present in building design today, and were greatly inspired by post WWII when spacious buildings with expansive walls of glass windows were favored to bring nature and the outside into the building. The house demonstrates the clean, crisp, simplified details of the mid-century modern style, a style that is not common in Santa Barbara. It represents of a brief period in post-World War II Santa Barbara during which architects like Riggs introduced new non-Spanish-influenced architectural themes. Mid-century modern



Original rendering by Lulah Riggs of the mid-century modern style Nelson Medical building, 1950. Courtesy UCSB Architecture and Design Collection.



Façade drawings by Lulah Riggs of the mid-century modern style Nelson Medical building, 1950. Courtesy UCSB Architecture and Design Collection.

style is characterized by asymmetric facades, rectilinear flat roofs, metal and glass compositions with open plans, smooth wall surfaces, and no decorative detailing.

Criterion F. Its identification as the creation, design, or work of a person or persons whose effort has significantly influenced the heritage of the City, the State, or the Nation;

The Nelson Medical building is the work of one of Santa Barbara's most noted architects, Lulah Maria Riggs, whose work significantly influenced the City. Riggs's work ranged and adapted to the architectural styles from the 1920s through the late 1980s. Her excellent interpretation of the Spanish Colonial Revival style smoothly merged into the 1930s where her work illustrated her open reception of the new styles, ranging from Art Deco to Streamline Moderne to the high international style. As the Nelson Medical building illustrates, after World War II she fell with ease into the West Coast interpretation of the mid-century modern style with its woodsy feeling. As a student of the Beaux Arts, she held fast to Classical systems of proportion. As her career indicates, she approached historic form as a source and sought to make it contemporary, making her work of each era important pieces of Santa Barbara's architectural repertoire.

Criterion I. Its unique location or singular physical characteristic representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood;

The unique mid-century modern building and landscape elements represent an established and familiar visual features of the neighborhood since 1950.

Historical Integrity:

Integrity is the ability of a property to convey its original appearance. There are essential physical features that must be considered to evaluate the integrity of a significant building. Since 1950, the building's location, setting, association, and feeling have not changed. The original design, materials, and workmanship have been retained so that the building conveys its original 1950 appearance and intent of the original architect. Thus, the building has retained a high level of historical integrity.

Recommendation:

Staff and the HLC Designation Subcommittee recommend that the HLC adopt a resolution recommending that City Council designate the Nelson Medical building as a City Landmark. Staff recommends the proposed boundary of the City Landmark designation be the entire parcel.

Works Cited:

Gebhard, David (1992). *Lulah Maria Riggs: a Woman in Architecture 1921–1980*. Capra Press.

UCSB Architecture and Design Collection Files and Drawings.

Wikipedia, *Lulah Maria Riggs*, web. April 26, 2019.